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SUBJECT: DASD SEDNEY MEETINGS WITH ROKG, PRESIDENT-ELECT'S
TRANSITION TEAM ON ALLIANCE, OPCON, AFGHANISTAN

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun, Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary. In meetings with Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Asia David Sedney, ROKG officials and members of President-elect Lee Myung-bak's Transition Team stressed that the ROK-U.S. Alliance was a top priority for the incoming government, asking for ideas on how to improve the level of trust and cooperation. Opinions on re-addressing the transition of wartime operational control (OPCON) differed, but all raised the issue for early discussion in the new administration. Transition Team Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Chair Park Jin summarized an extended discussion of the issue by saying that the incoming government would respect the agreement to transition control by April 2012, but echoed ROK Foreign and Defense Ministries' concerns that the door remain open for consultations with the USG closer to the planned transition date depending on conditions on the Korean Peninsula at that time. DASD Sedney stressed that the transition date had been set after extensive study and consultation, explicitly taking into account the DPRK's current and projected nuclear capability, while also noting that the USG would not push through a transition if it would adversely affect security. Future ROK contributions in Afghanistan, strategic flexibility, and ROK regional relations were also discussed. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) DASD Sedney met with Park Sun-won, Secretary to the President for National Security Strategy; Cho Byung-jae, Director General for North American Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Song Bong-heon, Director General for International Policy, Ministry of National Defense; Park Jin, GNP National Assembly Representative and Chairman of the Transition Team's Foreign Affairs, Unification and National Security Subcommittee; Hyun In-taek, Korea University Professor of International Relations and member of the same committee; and Kwon Jong-rak, former Ambassador to Ireland and head of the Foreign Affairs Unit of the Presidential Secretariat.

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STRONGER U.S.-ROK RELATIONS ON THE HORIZON

¶3. (C) DASD Sedney began his visit by having breakfast with Park Sun-won, Secretary to the President for National Security Strategy. Dr. Park stressed that good progress had

been made on Alliance issues despite the sometimes difficult discussions that had taken place during the Roh Administration. MND DG Song Bong-heon also stressed that U.S.-ROK relations were on a firm footing, noting that there did not seem to be any contentious issues on the agenda at the January 23 16th Security Policy Initiative talks in Washington.

¶4. (C) Looking ahead, ROKG officials were optimistic that the new administration would promote strong U.S.-ROK relations. The Blue House's Dr. Park Sun-won said Defense Minister Kim Jang-soo had gotten a "good feeling" from his discussion with the Lee Myung-bak transition team and had asked Park how the Blue House would feel if he were offered the opportunity to stay on as defense minister in the new administration. Park said he had advised him to stay on if possible. MND's DG Song told DASD Sedney that President-elect Lee's commitment to a strengthened U.S.-ROK Alliance came through at "every level" of interaction with the Transition Team.

¶5. (C) Transition Team Foreign Affairs Subcommittee Chair Park Jin called the revitalization of the ROK-U.S. Alliance the incoming administration's "clear top priority" in the next five years. Kwon Jong-rak asked for an informal exchange of views on how that could be accomplished. DASD Sedney noted the productive initial phone call between President Bush and President-elect Lee, said that his (DASD Sedney's) visit was mainly intended as a chance to hear the new team's ideas, and noted several issues in play on the USG side: the possibility of restarting the trilateral dialogue among the U.S., Japan and the ROK; continued, and even closer, coordination on the DPRK denuclearization issue, including preparing for the chance that the DPRK would not react well to the new ROKG; the need for a discussion of ballistic missile defense, in light of the DPRK's capabilities; and the importance of the ROKG continuing and augmenting its presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, as part of a "global alliance."

¶6. (C) Over lunch, Representative Hwang Jin-ha told DASD Sedney that the reason for Lee Myung-bak's landslide victory in December was that he articulated a strategy for national security. After a review of what was wrong and right during the previous administration, it is clear that the U.S. alliance needs to be strengthened. The problem under the current administration was differing threat perceptions between Washington and Seoul, having to do mostly with the way the respective governments evaluated North Korea. Unfortunately, President Roh's basic policy divided the public into two parts -- pro- and anti-American. Lee hopes the relationship with the U.S. will grow into a global partnership with the two countries working together on the global war on terror (about which Seoul needs to do a better job persuading the public, Hwang noted), Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement, Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), and missile defense in order to reinforce the relationship.

OPCON

¶7. (C) MOFAT's DG Cho Byung-jae and MND's DG Song Bong-heon both indicated support of the U.S.-ROK decision to transition wartime OPCON to the ROK by April 2012, with DG Cho calling the OPCON decision and the agreement to move 2ID south of Seoul "the two most important elements of Alliance transformation" because they significantly change the U.S. mission on the Peninsula. He said the U.S.-ROK agreement on strategic flexibility put off some questions for the future but that it did hint at the emergence of a U.S. regional role that would include American forces and facilities in Korea. Defining that larger role for the Alliance should be the main agenda item for the first summit meeting between President Bush and Lee Myung-bak, Cho urged, saying he had suggested the same thing in his report to the transition team. We must give thought to a vision for the Alliance role in Northeast Asia as well as its continued relevance on the

Korean Peninsula, Cho concluded.

¶18. (C) In the meeting with Transition Team foreign policy advisors Park Jin, Hyun In-tae, and Kwon Jong-rak, Kwon said that the incoming government would respect the agreement to transition control by April 2012, but wanted to "leave open" the possibility of a change in the timing of transition, depending on whether the DPRK nuclear issue were resolved; on whether the ROKG was really ready to take over the needed missions; and on whether the security situation on the Korean Peninsula was appropriate. This was not a proposal to renegotiate the transition date, he said, but a request to consult together closer to the planned transition date. Hyun added that the incoming government would not raise the issue right away, but at some point would want to evaluate the operational capability of the ROK military, perhaps at the end of 2009. LTC Mike Finnegan noted that the agreement included just such a consultation arrangement.

¶19. (C) Park then said that he wanted rephrase what the others had said: that through consultation, the ROKG might want to adjust the timing of the transition, but it would not ask for renegotiation. He emphasized that the Lee team respected the agreement, "but whether we can meet the timetable depends on denuclearization," an opinion shared by MND DG Song. Sedney said that the U.S. side did not agree to the concept of conditioning the transition on denuclearization, as the DPRK's nuclear capabilities and the ROK military's capabilities were both fully taken into account when the U.S. and ROK discussed the OPCON transition and set the April 2012 date. Sedney noted that since the agreement, ROK military progress was on track and even ahead of what was initially expected. The transition could theoretically be completed even earlier than planned. In any case, Sedney said, the USG would not make any move that weakened mutual security.

¶10. (C) Kwon said that maybe there was no need to raise the issue since it was fundamental that the timing of the transition could be adjusted if it were clear that the transition would undermine security conditions.

AFGHANISTAN

¶11. (C) Park Sun-won said he thought it would be difficult to convince the National Assembly to approve sending ROK troops back into Afghanistan, but that he personally hoped that would be possible because he had traveled there during the Korean hostage crisis and had seen for himself how important it was to increase the presence of international troops. He said he had also advocated that the ROK take on the mission to train-and-equip the Afghan national police but that MND had been unwilling to supply the necessary equipment. He strongly hinted, however, that if the USG were to renew that request it would likely receive a more positive reply. LTC Finnegan pointed out that the United States was not expecting MND to send its own vehicles and equipment, but suggested that the ROKG consider procuring equipment from ROK defense industries for the express purpose of transfer to the Government of Afghanistan. Dr. Park replied that he thought that was possible, provided the U.S. was willing to transport the vehicles to Afghanistan aboard our military aircraft.

REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT; SIX PARTY TALKS

¶12. (C) Looking to regional issues, the Transition Team predicted that shuttle diplomacy would be revived between Lee Myung-bak and Prime Minister Fukuda of Japan and that ROK-Japan relations would improve in 2008. That could include military-to-military cooperation in the areas of search-and-rescue, participation in RIMPAC and the like, Park Jin said. He also thought the ROKG would work to revive trilateral (U.S.-ROK-Japan) cooperation but warned that a challenge for the Lee Myung-bak Administration would be to keep good relations with China while recovering relations with the United States and Japan. He suggested the ROK would

also want to develop closer cooperation with Australia and India because it did not like Japan being "out front" in groupings that involved those countries and the United States. Noting that Dr. Park had done his dissertation on the ROK-Japan-U.S. trilateral relationship, LTC Finnegan suggested he work from retirement to advocate closer cooperation because ideas that originated in Seoul would be well-received. Dr. Park said China had many problems to overcome and was causing some concern in South Korea over grain pricing and investment issues. Russia was "all talk and no action" in the Six-Party Talks and its relations with Northeast Asia in general, and would be "rather troublesome" to deal with in the future, Park said.

¶13. (C) Representative Hwang Jin-ha Lee also emphasized that South Korea needs better relations with Japan, but also needs to keep China friendly because their support in the Six-Party Talks is important. Hwang said he believes that President-elect Lee will take a completely different approach to North Korea and that he is ready to meet with representatives from North Korea to convince them to denuclearize. After the North denuclearizes, then the South can move forward with opening and aid, but nothing will proceed until denuclearization.

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